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Tina Coffelt

Iowa State University, tcoffelt@iastate.edu

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Keywords

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Disciplines

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Revealing Sexual Information in Mother-Daughter Relationships

Tina A. Coffelt

Department of English and Communication Studies Program, Iowa State University, Ames, IA
USA

Email: tcoffelt@iastate.edu

Abstract

Communication privacy management theory informed this study of nine mothers and their 18 or 19- year-old daughters who were interviewed to understand privacy rule foundations that influence their decisions to reveal or conceal sexual information. This study shows the salience of motivation and the risk-benefit ratio when making decisions about revealing or concealing private information. Namely, mothers may have many motivations to talk to their daughters, whereas daughters are motivated to discuss sex with a trusted source. Mothers' perceived risks of talking about sex included judgement from other parents and daughters were concerned about disappointing their parents. Additionally, a privacy rule emerged during joint mother-daughter interviews that stipulated 'we talk about everything but the details', and mothers volunteered their privacy rule acquisition of talking about sex with daughters differently from the ways their mothers talked to them. The findings augment sex education research by showing how mothers and daughters who talk about sex assess their decisions to do so.

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A recent application of communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002) integrated process models to explain how sexual information is managed within close, mother-daughter relationships (see Coffelt and Olson, 2014). These models lay out changes in information flow across a child's development as well as during a conversation. However, the models do not stipulate how mothers or daughters decide to discuss sexual topics. Communication privacy management theory specifies five criteria that are typically evaluated before revealing or concealing private information (Petronio, 2002). The current study advances these process models by examining the criteria that guide mothers' and daughters' decisions to reveal or conceal sexual information.

The need for young people to receive sexual information remains relevant as over one-half of new STI cases in the USA are reported among 15-24 year olds (CDC, 2017). Parents' communication is associated with their offsprings' safe-sex practices (Booth-Butterfield and Sidelinger, 1998) and maintaining virginity (Karofsky, Zeng, and Kosorok, 2000). For example, 14-15 year olds who obtained sexual information from parents reported a positive association with fewer sex partners and use of a condom (Secor-Turner et al. 2011). Furthermore, parent-teenager communication has been shown to reduce unintended pregnancies in some studies (Jaccard and Dittus, 1991).

Yet, sexual communication within many parent-child relationships is often challenging, awkward, or embarrassing (Heisler, 2005; Jaccard and Dittus, 1991). Compared to other topics typically discussed in families, such as money, education, or everyday things, sex is distinct because it is discussed with less openness (Baxter and Akkoor, 2011). Young people often believe sexual information should not be revealed (Caughlin et al. 2005), thereby avoiding sexual topics to protect their privacy boundaries (Guerrero and Afifi, 1995). Parents, too, acknowledge that the topic is a particularly difficult one to discuss with children (Rosenthal and Collis, 1997). Despite difficulties, parent-child sexual communication influences young people's sexual behaviours and can prepare them for intimate relationships in adult life (Feldman and Rosenthal, 2000).

Some parent-child relationships comfortably manage sexual information while others avoid the topic completely. For example, 20% of young women aged 13-19 years perceived communication with their parents about sex as very easy or comfortable, 46% reported communication was generally easy and sometimes uncomfortable, 14% said it was never easy and always uncomfortable, and 20% said they did not talk to a parent about sex (Pistella and Bonati, 1999). The mother-daughter relationship may be the family relationship most receptive to sexual education because it processes more sexual information than other dyadic, familial relationships (e.g., Newcomer and Udry, 1985). There is much to learn from mothers and daughters who have introduced sexual information into their relational discourse.

Theoretical Framework

Communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002) explains how private information is managed during interaction. Using a boundary metaphor, the theory describes how individuals control their private information by retaining it within a personal, privacy boundary or regulating its movement across a privacy boundary from the inner self to a co-owned privacy

boundary with another. Individuals regulate the passage of information across or retention within privacy boundaries, which vary in their density. Some privacy boundaries are thick and impenetrable while others are thin and porous. Additionally, the permeability of privacy boundaries shifts over time and by topic. Coffelt and Olson (2014) have described how sexual information is managed in mother-daughter relationships using these propositions of communication privacy management. However, their models do not explain how some mothers and daughters decide to reveal sexual information to the other. Communication privacy management offers such a mechanism with the inclusion of a rule-based management system that includes privacy rule foundations, which expound on the rules individuals invoke when they contemplate revealing or concealing private information.

Privacy Rule Foundations

Communication privacy management can explain both why and how private information is revealed by some and concealed by others by examining the application of privacy rules. These privacy rules are founded on at least five criteria—culture, gender, context, motivation, and risk-benefit ratio, which have all received empirical support (e.g., Miller, 2009). The acquisition of privacy rules occurs through socialisation in families or negotiation with new relational partners. Privacy rules can stabilise and become routine: they can become permanent privacy values or orientations; they can change; or sanctions can be issued to control their use (Petronio, 2002). The remainder of this section elaborates on the criteria for privacy rule development with sexual information in parent-child relationships.

Culture. In the USA, co-cultures are believed to vary in terms of communication rules (Vangelisti and Daly, 1988) and research on sexual communication supports this belief (e.g., Kim and Ward, 2007). For example, African-American youth between 11 and 13 years of age reported more parent-child sexual communication than Hispanics (Santa Maria et al. 2014). Mothers of Latin descent have indicated they are unsure about how much detail to include when talking with their children about sexual health, whereas no African American mothers reported this uncertainty (Murray et al. 2014). Cultural influences on parent-child sexual communication warrant analysis, when possible.

Gender. Sexual communication in family relationships differs based on the biological sex of the parent and offspring. For example, mothers and fathers send more sexual information messages to daughters than sons, and the content of the messages received by sons and daughters differs (e.g., Dilorio, Kelley, Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999; Sneed et al. 2013). Furthermore, sexual conversations between mothers and daughters contain more words than those between mothers and sons (Lefkowitz, Kahlbaugh, and Sigman, 1996). Also, mothers talk with sons and daughters about different topics, and they talk about more topics with daughters than sons (Dilorio et al. 1999). Thus, the content and intensity of sexual communication has shown to vary by the biological sex of parents and children.

Motivation. The third criterion for rule development is the motivation of the sender to reveal private information. Researchers have been motivated by the causal connection between parental communication and young people's sexual behaviours (e.g., Clawson and Reese-Weber, 2003; Rosenthal, Senserrick, and Feldman, 2001). While the relationship between parental communication and young people's sexual behaviours is critically important, this motivation omits an understanding of parents' or children's real desires and intentions to talk with each other (or not). Young people (aged 10-25) not infrequently guard some private information because they believe it is socially inappropriate to reveal, they want to protect themselves or a relationship, or they believe parents are unresponsive (Guerrero and Afifi, 1995). However, their reasons to reveal private information have not been established. Indeed, existing research rarely recognises children's initiative to reveal information to their mothers. In brief, mothers' and daughters' motivation to reveal sexual information to each other needs investigation.

Context. The contextual criterion elaborates on the ways the social environment and the physical setting influence how privacy rules are managed (Petronio, 2002). Several contextual qualities impact sexual communication, such as the place, timing, siblings, social class, or general family environment (see Jaccard, Dodge, and Dittus, 2002). For example, mothers in the USA have been found to talk to their teenage children about sex in the car, in the kitchen after school, or in front of the television (Pluhar and Kuriloff, 2004; Rosenthal, Feldman, and Edwards, 1998). However, privacy boundary management shifts around age 13, typically by shifting the target of disclosures from parents to peers (Petronio, 2002). Family structure also brings about differences in privacy management, as noted among step-family members who feel caught as they coordinate new and renegotiate existing boundary rules (Afifi, 2003).

Risk-benefit ratio. The evaluation of risks and benefits may distinguish between those who have conversations about sex and those who do not. Benefits of sexual communication have been identified as including relational closeness (Pluhar and Kuriloff, 2004) or fewer risky sexual behaviours (Jaccard, Dittus, and Gordon, 1996; Koesten, Miller, and Hummert, 2001). Risks have also been associated with sexual communication. Three levels of risk, according to communication privacy management, are high, moderate, or low (Petronio, 2002, 67, 69) where high-risk information causes 'shame, threat or severe embarrassment'; moderate-risk information involves that which is 'uncomfortable, troublesome, or aggravating'; and low risk information can be understood as white lies. Studies have demonstrated that parents described the risks of sexual communication as being tuned out (Pluhar and Kuriloff, 2004) or being evaluated negatively by their child (Feldman and Rosenthal, 2000), yet these studies did not evaluate the level of risk parents perceived by talking about sex. In addition to level of risk, Petronio (2002) further identifies types of risk as "security, stigma, face, relational, or role" risks (pp. 69-71). Sexual communication may invoke a specific type of risk, which this study can assess.

In sum, sexual information is often challenging to share in family relationships. Previous research (Coffelt & Olson, 2014) has shown how some mothers and daughters in the USA manage sexual information as the daughter matures. The present study extends their work by

explaining how mothers and daughters decide to reveal sexual information to each other. The privacy rule foundations from communication privacy management lend theoretical insight about the criteria mothers and daughters may render when deciding to reveal/conceal sexual information. Overall, this study seeks understanding of the criteria mothers and daughters enact when they decide to reveal or conceal sexual information to the other by asking how do mothers and daughters decide to reveal or conceal sexual information?

Method

Procedures

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011) after obtaining approval from the institutional review board (IRB) at the University of Missouri. College students enrolled in Communication and Human Development and Families Studies courses at a large, Midwest US university were presented information about the study. To be eligible, students had to be 18 or 19 years old. At these ages, individuals can consent to research while also being able to recollect meaningful sexual communication interactions from their youth and adolescence. The maturation of older students could alter interpretations of these conversations. The study also required the participation of a mother for a joint interview as well as an individual interview. The recruitment script did not stipulate the inclusion of male or female students. However, only young women volunteered. Interested students received a recruitment script to invite their mothers. There was considerable similarity across these mother-daughter relationships because of their closeness and open communication about sex. The results, therefore, are best understood in light of this self-selection bias.

Students were initially offered extra credit for participating. Three students received 10 extra credit points after they and their mothers completed the interviews. An alternate assignment was available for students who did not participate. Initial recruitment efforts led to only a few participants coming forward, so the incentive was modified with IRB approval. Instead of extra credit, each participant received \$25, which was funded from the author's resources. Six additional mother-daughter dyads completed the interviews. Recruitment ceased after nearly four months of recruitment efforts to approximately 700 students. Recruiting college students and their mothers was challenging because of the nature of the topic, the geographic distance between the college students and their mothers, and scheduling a time for three people to meet. The decision to discontinue recruitment was guided by the notion of theoretical saturation or the point at which 'collecting additional data seems counterproductive' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, 136). Indeed, all of these mothers and daughters claimed they were open about sex and described several conversations across the child's development where sexual information was discussed. Recruitment was surprisingly difficult, yet the similarity among the nine dyads who volunteered was notable.

Research Setting

Interviews were conducted in participants' homes ($n = 5$), in a university research lab ($n = 3$), or at the mother's worksite ($n = 1$). At each site, introductions and rapport building conversations opened the interaction. Then, informed consent and demographic forms were presented to and completed by the participants. All the participants were Caucasian but showed diversity in family structure, community size, and mother's educational level/occupation. Also, five of the daughters, without prompting, disclosed that they had experienced sexual intercourse.

Respondent interviews were utilised because they 'elicit open-ended responses' (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011, 179). A semi-structured interview guide included questions about the management of sexual information, including the criteria they used to decide whether to reveal or conceal sexual information to the other (see Appendix A). Mothers and daughters were interviewed together to obtain an accurate sense of their communication about sex. Together, the mothers and daughters could validate or question each other's understanding of their sexual communication. The individual interviews used the same interview guide with the intent for each person to share information she may not have been comfortable sharing in the joint interview. However, these mothers and daughters were very open with each other so there was little new information they shared in the individual interviews. The total interview time ranged from 1 hour 8 minutes to 1 hour 46 minutes, with an average time of 1 hour and 30 minutes. The audio data were transcribed and yielded 319 pages of single spaced transcriptions. The dyadic interviews ranged in length from 31 to 75 minutes and yielded 193 pages of single spaced data.

Data Analysis

The transcripts from the dyadic interview sessions provided substantial data to analyse. Asides, commentaries and in-process memos were used during early analysis, and coding and categorisation were used during later analysis (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). Careful and repeated reading of the transcripts allowed for reflection on the experiences of the mothers and daughters and the emergent themes that answered the research question. Ideas that emerged from the data with recurrence, repetition, or forcefulness (Owen, 1984) were organised into new documents and assigned a category label (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). These category labels reflected communication privacy management's criteria when there were sufficient responses, and they included poignant data that answered the research question but did not directly align with one of communication privacy management's criteria. In this way, the analysis took an etic stance by using theory to categorise data and an emic perspective by remaining open to participants' experiences. In either circumstance, the new documents contained representative exemplars of quotations from the dyadic interviews.

Verification was completed using member checks (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). All the daughters received a summary document of the findings. They were asked to review the summary, relay it to their mothers, and provide confirmation or concern about the summation. Three daughters responded after sharing the document with their mothers. They confirmed that the summary was an accurate depiction of their experiences. Additional verification was performed with persistent observation and thick, rich quotes (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Findings

Nine mothers and 18 or 19-year-old daughters were interviewed about their decision-making criteria to reveal/conceal sexual information. The mothers and daughters demonstrated agreement with each other's renditions of the sexual communication by using paralanguage (i.e., uh huh, yeah) while the other was speaking. The findings show that two of communication privacy management's criteria— motivation and the risk-benefit ratio—were particularly prevalent considerations that informed their decisions to reveal or conceal sexual information. While responses were provided about the other criteria, the data did not meet the standards to qualify as a theme. Additionally, while the focus of this study was not on the rules *per se*, themes emerged that shed light on the decision to reveal or conceal sexual information. First, a privacy rule was revealed by eight of the dyads in the form of 'we talk about everything but the details'. Second, mothers described how their privacy rules were acquired, namely by talking about sex differently from the ways their own mothers did. The findings include excerpts from the interviews. All names are pseudonyms where M names are mothers and D names are daughters.

Privacy Rule Foundations

Motivation. Mother-daughter dyads were asked what motivated them to talk about sex. In each interview session, mothers responded to this question first. Mothers' reasons included physical and relational health, physical safety, abstaining from sexual activity, circumventing inaccurate information from peers, or using contraception and protection, among others. Some mothers had one or two specific issues that were of greatest concern to them. Other mothers listed many reasons why sexual communication was carried out. The forcefulness of these mothers' answers supported their strong motivation to talk with their daughters about sex.

Michelle's (in-tact family, mother of 3) excerpt below demonstrates the multiple motivations held by these mothers and the complex ways in which these motivations operated.

Because it's the right thing to do. Again, because I want them to be happy. I want them to be healthy. I want them to enjoy their lives. I want them to grow up to be good partners, have good relationships, a healthy respect for their bodies, their sexuality; I mean all of those things.

Michelle references her own obligation as a parent as one motivator to talk about sex. In addition, she adds happiness, health, and relational quality as motivators that prompted her to talk with her children. Mae's (widowed, remarried, blended family; mother of three, five children in the family) remarks below show her concern about her daughter's physical safety.

I feel like she could really be easily taken advantage of and so, I do try and talk to her about being really aware that not everybody. There are evil people and there are evil men and evil situations that you could be in and you need to be very aware of that.

Mothers revealed sexual information for varied reasons. Some of the information they shared with their daughters was educational in nature and less personal. Other information revealed by mothers was designed to convey their values and desires for their daughters. Regardless of the type of sexual information provided, mothers conveyed several motivations that prompted them to talk with their daughters about sex. Occasionally, daughters would offer their mothers reassuring statements about their sexual health practices. For example, Donielle (19, oldest of four) provided the following example of sexual communication:

Like we talked about like um, I guess the last time I went to the gyno, I told her I got tested for everything, just to inform her that I had and that nothing was wrong. That, 'See, mom, I do protect myself.' I am safe.

When Diane (19, oldest of two) was asked what motivates her to talk to her mom, she replied, "Oh, I guess just to, I mean, just to assure her that. I mean, I do remember what can happen'. These reassurances were not mentioned by all of the daughters, but they do hint at the linkages between mothers' sexual communication and daughters' sexual health practices.

Daughters were motivated to talk with their mothers because they viewed their mothers as a trusted source. The daughters valued their mothers' opinions or trusted their experiences. College students have reported that their parents should be the primary source of sexual information, despite their friends being their most frequent source of information (Rutledge et al. 2011). Dawn (19, oldest of two) compared her mother to her friends, which made her mother's experience and knowledge evident.

I just talk to her about it because I think she's experienced it longer than me and she understands everything. So if I really have something I was curious about or wanted to know if it bothered her, I can ask her, cause she's been around longer than me, and she knows what she's talking about. I think 'cause she's older. It's easier for me, for some reason, it's easier to talk to her 'cause she's older, about it, than it is about my friends. I'm just like, 'Well, you're in the same boat I am, so what do you know?'

Dawn implied that when she had questions about sex, her peers had the same level of knowledge she had and would, therefore, not be plausible sources. In addition, her mother's experience made her credible, which prompted Dawn to seek her mother's input on sexual matters. Donielle also elaborated on the benefits of getting sexual information from her mother.

And like in high school, we didn't have like any sort of sexual education. At all. Like we were supposed to! We went to the cafeteria every Friday to have health class and we didn't talk about anything. We sat there and did homework instead of talking about the issues we were supposed to. And, you know, they would be like, 'Oh, we're going to talk about this today.' And they'd walk out of the room. So I'm like, 'Well, I want to know about this!' So I'd go home and I'd be like, 'Hey mom! Tell me about this!' [M: chuckles]

And, so I feel like just having that makes it, it makes it easier on you when you like, when you're my age and you are like forced out into the world and, you know, you have these decisions to make and you don't know the right ones to make. It makes it easier, and it makes you feel more confident in your decisions, if you know that you have advice from someone that you can actually apply to the situation.

All the daughters in the study were consistent in their rationale for selecting their mothers as both a confidant with and a source of sexual information.

Risk-benefit ratio. The mother-daughter dyads were queried about the risks and benefits of talking with the other about sex. Their openness about sex led to few responses about risks and benefits of not talking. Therefore, their responses centred on their practices of talking about sex. The benefits of talking about sex seemed to outweigh the risks and prompted sexual communication between them. Participants identified risks and benefits for themselves and for each other. Mothers in particular identified the consequences of backlash from other parents or appearing to condone sexual activity. Michelle described this risk as follows.

You know, other parents would say, 'Oh my god. I can't believe my kid was at your house and you guys were talking. Or they asked you about this and you gave them an answer.' I mean that's certainly always a risk that you take.

Michelle did not specify whether or not she had experienced backlash from other parents, but she was aware that some parents might want to control how sexual information was shared with their children. Myrna's (divorced, four children) daughter responded to her mother's similar statement with surprise by saying, 'Hum,' as if she had never considered her mom's peer relationships as issues in their mother-daughter discourse. Myrna illustrated the risk of appearing to condone sexual activity when she said, 'I think for me, again, as a mom, one of the biggest risks is that it will be perceived as condoning'. Desiree (19, oldest of three) reinforced this belief when she said:

I think lots of parents think, oh my god, if they talk to their kids about sex, they're going to go out and try it tomorrow, and I don't want them to, and they don't.

Desiree was re-directed with the question, 'For you personally, are there any risks?' She continued, 'No, since I was educated about it, I felt comfortable making my own choice'.

Daughters identified fear of punishment and judgement from a parent as the predominant risks of sexual communication. Debbie (19, third of four) described the fears she had had, particularly when she was younger.

The risks, I guess, not so much now. But when, I guess, when I first, like I said, first became sexually active and stuff. I was mostly just scared to like, that she would think, like frown upon what I was doing, being disappointed. I just have this big fear of disappointing my parents. And, I've always had that. I think most children probably do.

That was probably the biggest risk, I think. I didn't want to disappoint her and stuff and her be like, 'Oh my gosh, you're having sex. You're a bad child.'

Debbie admitted that most of her fears centred on disappointing her parents if they knew she was sexually active. She believed the risks were much stronger when she was younger, but did not perceive risks presently. Marla shared her opinion about daughters' fears:

So I think you have that [fear] first and foremost as opposed to your curiosity, you're mostly fearful what somebody's gonna think because it's just created to be that way in society, you know. You can't talk about it, can't do this, can't do that.

Some mothers and daughters reported there were no risks to sexual communication. Mary (in-tact, mother of eight) and Donita (19, sixth of eight) were emphatic that sexual communication was not a risk in their interactions:

I: Do you see any risks in talking about sex?

M: No.

D: I don't think so. Um, unless you're like. I don't know if there are. I'm sure there's a lot of schools that do just the safe sex and not. I think that is bad because it's like they're telling these teenagers that's your only choice. It seems to me like, they're telling them, 'Everyone has sex' and that's pretty much your only choice. So you have to learn how to be careful. But otherwise, I don't think so.

I: You don't think there are any risks?

D: uh huh.

I: Ok. Ok.

M: Not mother and daughter.

Dana (19, third of five), too, was also unable to identify any risks:

I don't have the risk of her telling other people, but it just makes me really trust her. I don't know if there's really a risk. Not that I can think of. She's not the type of mom to judge me for any of my actions. She just says, 'Ok, you've done this. Now we need to worry about this now.' So, I don't feel like she would judge me.

In sum, risks of revealing sexual information for some mothers were the backlash from other parents and appearing to condone sexual activity. Daughters identified fear of judgment

and punishment from their mothers as the major risk of sexual communication. Some mothers and daughters reported no risks of sexual communication. Despite these identifiable risks, the participants did not believe the risks were compelling enough to restrict sexual communication.

Mothers and daughters alike believed there were many benefits to sexual communication. Mothers, for example, discussed 'tons of benefits' as Monica's (blended family; mother of two, four children in the family) excerpt below illustrates:

Well, tons of benefits. I don't see anything bad about it. I mean, I can't think of anything negative. I think it's all beneficial because. I mean in anything in life, the more you know and the more knowledgeable you are about things, then, the better off you are. The more knowledge you have and the more openness you have talking about something, then the better off you're gonna be in the long run. So, I guess what I'm hoping by, to get out of me being able to talk to her, is her feeling more comfortable and maybe thinking that, you know, sex is something important.

Monica described several of the benefits she perceived by having sexual communication with Debbie. Debbie monitored her mum's tone of voice and questioned her mother's intentions when she asked, 'Are you like preaching this to me right now?' Monica answered by saying, 'No. I'm just. No. Maybe. Yeah.' This moment during their interview showed Debbie critiquing her mother's tone, thereby asserting Debbie's wish to transition to a more egalitarian relationship during her emerging adulthood. Debbie later affirmed their open relationship, as with the other daughters, and acknowledged this openness as a relational benefit to sexual communication.

I couldn't imagine not having an open relationship. Like I think that's the beneficial factor to me. Because like, really, who else would I go talk with about? I mean, obviously, like you have those girlfriends and stuff that you all like gossip with it about and stuff. But. Really she's the only person.

Deidra (19, second of two) similarly articulated the sentiments of the daughters, 'Definitely the benefits are always just that I could come to her about anything. Once you pass the sexual communication, it's just like, it doesn't matter'. Deidra knew that if she could talk to her mother about sex, she could talk to her about 'anything.' The mothers listened to their daughters' thoughts with interest and without interruption, as if they were hearing positive feedback about their parenting decisions for the first time.

The benefits of revealing sexual information were many, according to mothers in the study, such as conveying knowledge, influencing sexual behaviour, or being comfortable talking about other topics. Daughters focused their comments on relational qualities, reporting that they felt closer to their mothers because they could talk about sex. Overall, the benefits outweighed the risks and these mothers and daughters revealed considerable sexual information to each other, with one exception—everything but the details.

Privacy Rule: Everything but the Details

Privacy rules determine 'who receives a disclosure, when, how much or how little, where the disclosure occurs, and how a person might conceal information' (Petronio, 2002, 23). Within eight of these mother-daughter relationships, a consistent rule was noted. Specifically, sexual disclosures could be made at any time, on any aspect of sex, with the exception of the details of sexual activity. The data showed that mothers and daughters concealed their respective details, even though the following interaction highlights the daughter's details.

Debbie: I'm really comfortable talking about anything with her. Not that I can think of anyways. I think pretty much everything's open, except I mean like, I don't really tell her, like I just said. Other than when I have sex...

Monica: I don't want to talk about details.

Debbie: ... who I'm having sex with. Yeah, details like that. [Monica: That's a...] That's kind of like an unsaid rule that I don't discuss with my mom.

This example explicitly stipulates a rule that guided the process of revealing and concealing sexual information. These mothers and daughters co-constructed a privacy boundary whereby the details of sexual relations were left as private and all other information was shared. Very little sexual information was considered private within these mother-daughter relationships. The notion of 'everything' that these participants included as sexual information is demonstrated in the following quote from Dana:

We talk about the relationship with a guy, and me, and like if I'm sexually active or not. And, like, if I have a boyfriend or if I don't have a boyfriend and if I've gone out on any dates.

This excerpt focuses on relationships and dating broadly and sex less specifically. The sexual topics discussed by these participants included sexual education, relationships, and morality. These mothers and daughters varied on the amount and types of information they shared with each other, yet they adhered to the privacy rule that they could talk about everything with the exception of the details.

Privacy Rule Acquisition

Acquiring rules for privacy disclosures takes place through socialisation or negotiation (Petronio, 2002). In the interviews, unsolicited rule acquisition statements surfaced from four mothers. Specifically, these four mothers shared a desire to communicate openly with their daughters because their mothers did not talk with them about sex. Marla (divorced, remarried; mother of four) expressed the essence of what these participating mothers believed.

I always wanted that [open communication with her daughter] because it wasn't like

that at my home growing up. It was totally different. I didn't want the way I felt toward my mother at that point in my life...I didn't want her to ever feel that way toward me. And I just wanted to be more open about it. I just didn't want her to feel threatened. I wanted her to feel safe about it.

These four mothers mentioned their mothers' closed stance with sexual information and, as a result, countered this practice by invoking new rules with their own daughters. During these disclosures in the interviews, the daughters listened to their mothers or supported her position. For example, Diane interrupted her mother at one point and said, 'Grandma's very, kind of reserved, um, in that area'. Thus, some mothers re-negotiated a topic avoidance privacy rule they learned in their families of origin and established their own practices of openness with their daughters.

In sum, the participants in this study were very open with each other and revealed information on several sexual topics. Their disclosures were prompted by mothers' strong and various motivations as well as daughters' needs to get sexual information from a trusted source. In addition, mothers and daughters believed that the benefits of discussing sex outweighed the risks. The acquisition of the open privacy rule for some of these mothers was prompted by the silence on the topic of sex with their mothers. Together, these findings tap into some of the privacy rule management processes that operate in a few, close mother-daughter relationships.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to understand privacy rule foundations that influence mothers and daughters in their decisions to reveal or conceal sexual information. This study, like others (e.g., Miller, 2009), shows the salience of communication privacy management's criteria of motivation and the risk-benefit ratio to use when making decisions about revealing or concealing private information. Findings highlight mothers' and daughters' motivations, risks, and benefits while also contributing a new privacy rule applicable to mother-daughter sexual communication. Additionally, mothers mentioned how they acquired their privacy rules. The findings augment sex education research by showing how mothers and daughters who talk about sex assess their decisions to do so.

The dyadic unit of analysis strengthened the study because the voices of mothers and daughters were heard simultaneously. Much relationship research relies on a single member of the relationship to account for the communication within it, whereas this study relied on the co-construction of recollections from mothers and daughters. This approach provided data rich with interactions and dual perspectives of the same events. Sexual information obtained from parents and young people is typically contradictory (Jaccard et al. 1998); in this study, mothers and daughters were together to verify information or rectify discordant perspectives.

Privacy Rule Foundations

Motivation. Mothers in this study identified many motivations to talk with their daughters about sex. These reasons included sex education, sexual behaviour hopes, and relational aspirations for their daughters, which were not unlike those of parents in other qualitative studies (e.g., Dyson and Smith, 2012). Mothers looked at sexual communication as not only educational, but also a way to convey values and attitudes about relationships involving sexual activity. Indeed, the relational element of sexual activity differentiates parent-child communication from school-based sex education (Kennett, Humphreys, and Schultz, 2012). In addition, the mothers in the study are concerned about their daughters' sexual knowledge, safety, attitudes and behaviours. These findings support the assumptions made by other researchers (e.g., Clawson and Reese-Weber, 2003; Rosenthal et al. 2001) who connect communication to sexual behaviours. However, the findings extend previous research by revealing the existence of motivators other than sex education and influencing sexual behaviour. These additional motivating factors must be acknowledged and conveyed to families who have little to no sexual communication because sexual behaviour, while important, is not the only reason that parents talk with their children about sex. Daughters in this study were motivated to talk with their mothers to obtain accurate, sexual information from a trustworthy source. This finding is not surprising given that young people seek both a trustworthy and expert source when they get information about risky behaviours (Guilamo-Ramos et al. 2006). Study findings suggest that while daughters may talk with their peers about sex, they trust their mothers' information, counsel, and support.

Risk-benefit ratio. The mothers and daughters in this study saw few risks associated with sexual communication. Mothers acknowledged a low level of risk, primarily face risk (Petronio, 2002), as mothers were somewhat concerned about other parents' judgment if daughters told their friends sexual information. They are not concerned about their daughters giving misinformation, but rather the backlash from other parents who might want to control how their children obtain sexual information. Other mothers have similarly reported their fear of others' reactions (Stone, Ingham, and Gibins, 2013). Other risks of talking about sex have been reported, such as not listening to a parent (Pluhar and Kuriloff, 2004) or being evaluated negatively by a child (Feldman and Rosenthal, 2000), neither of which were mentioned by the participants in this study. These differences demonstrate that sexual communication can be a low risk activity in some family relationships.

In this study, daughters reported fear of punishment for engaging in sexual activities or judgment about their sexual curiosity, which aligns with communication privacy management's explanation of security or face risks. Mothers may experience similar risks; however, the data from these participants do not furnish evidence to speculate. Future research would be beneficial to contribute to this enquiry. Guerrero and Afifi (1995) found that young people avoid talking about their sexual experiences to protect their privacy boundaries. The current study augments their findings by contributing a theoretical explanation for why the privacy boundary is protected. Even though mothers and daughters identified a few, potential risks, they persisted with revealing sexual information because of the many benefits they perceived.

The benefits of revealing sexual information for the mothers in this study were many. Daughters recognised relational closeness with their mothers as a benefit of talking about sex. To be clear, sexual communication does not cause relational closeness. Parents and young

people who do or do not talk about sex show no differences on relational closeness or satisfaction (Afifi, Joseph, and Aldeis, 2008). However, close mother-daughter relationships seem to provide a site where sexual information can be shared. Additionally, the inclusion of benefits children experience (regardless of age) underscores their agency and active role in sexual communication.

Remaining criteria. The other criteria of communication privacy management – culture, gender, and context – were not discussed by participants in ways that qualified as a theme. There were comments made about the role of fathers in sex education, or the communication between mothers and sons, and even some comments about sister-brother interactions. However, there were insufficient commonalities between these to suggest a theme. Contextual factors were also mentioned in some cases, yet a unified theme did not emerge here either. Cultural influences were not mentioned, in part, due to the interviewer's emphasis on the other criteria. Similarities among the participants (White, middle-class) overshadowed inquiry into other cultural influences (i.e., urban/rural, level of education, religion) on the management of sexual information.

Privacy Rule

An unexpected finding from these interviews was the discovery of a specific rule about sexual disclosures. The rule 'we can talk about everything but the details' shows the extent of boundary coordination around co-owned sexual information exercised by these mothers and daughters. Mothers in these relationships had open privacy boundaries while daughters' fluctuated at different phases of development (Coffelt & Olson, 2014). When interviewed at age 19, they they recognised that they had discussed considerable sexual content with their mothers. However, mothers and daughters were clear that the details of their respective sexual activities were not discussed with each other, thereby leaving this information contained within each person's privacy boundary. Sex educators could preemptively suggest that details not be discussed in order to lessen apprehension that sexual communication may invoke.

Rule Acquisition

This study also hints at the ways in which privacy rules for sexual conversations are established. Namely, some mothers recall the lack of sexual communication in relationships with their mothers and want to communicate differently with their daughters. Parents in other studies reported similar disappointment about the lack of sexual communication in their families of origin (Morawska et al. 2015), and affirm that the sexual silence in their childhood motivated them to talk about sex with their children, despite the discomfort (Alcalde and Quelopana, 2013). The description of family privacy orientations in communication privacy management focuses on nuclear family boundaries (Petronio, 2002). The results from this study suggest that privacy orientations from one generation may be altered in the next generation. Thus, some mothers may be guided by a strong desire to manage sexual information differently from their mothers.

Limitations and Concluding Remarks

Self-selection bias, self-serving bias, and the homogeneity of the sample restrict the findings. The mothers and daughters who volunteered were, perhaps, atypical in their openness with sexual information. While the findings show how sexual communication can be achieved, there are likely other relationship factors at play that foster this openness, which this study does not account for. Similarly, participants may have presented themselves positively and withheld difficult moments. The participants were also all White and came from middle-class families. The findings should be interpreted with these limitations in mind. The data are further limited by a small sample size.

The non-participation by men is important. The recruitment script for this study did not preclude the inclusion of young men, yet only young women volunteered. The course composition of communication and human development and family studies courses from which participants were recruited favours women, which could have limited male participation. A few of the mothers and daughters in this study commented that sexual information belongs to same-sex family relationships, although this idea did not emerge as a theme, it could be yet another reason why young men did not volunteer to participate in this study with their mothers.

Despite these limitations, the mothers and daughters who volunteered were open with each other about the topic of sex and were willing to share considerable information in their interviews. Therefore, their experiences offer important insight about family relationships that conduct sexual communication with relative ease. The participants in this study show that sexual communication can occur in their relationship. This study lends support for and strengthens the rule management processes of communication privacy management and sheds light on the various influences that guide decision making about revealing or concealing sexual information in mother-daughter relationships.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your family.
2. Tell me about the most recent conversation the two of you had.
3. How would you describe your communication with each other?
4. When I say “sexual communication” what do you think of, particularly as it relates to talking with each other?
5. Do you think sexual information is challenging to talk about? Why or why not?
6. Have you talked to each other about sex? Tell me about that.
7. What are the benefits of talking to each other about sex? Risks? [Note: if participants focus on benefits and risks of sex, try and direct them to communicative/relationship benefits/risks as well]
8. What are the benefits of not talking to each other about sex? Risks? [Note: if participants focus on benefits and risks of sex, try and direct them to communicative/relationship benefits/risks as well]
9. Why do you to talk to each other about sex? What do you believe to be your responsibility to communicate about sex with each other?
10. What do you think keeps you from talking to each other about sex?
11. What is the role of (child’s) father in sexual communication in your family? Why do you think this is?
12. What differences are there between talking to sons and daughters about sex? (If any...) Why do you think there are differences?
13. What didn’t I ask you that you thought I would? What else would you like to tell me about communicating with each other about sex?